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ABSTRACT

Many students conceive of learning institutions as factories and of writing as the delivery of a predictable product. An excerpt from a typical student theme reflects the fact that much student writing is hardly more than an assemblage of cliches. Teachers can show students the stereotyped nature of typical student writing by constructing a composite paper of sentences from a number of student papers; by contrasting commonplace papers with those that show a thoughtful, individual response to an assignment; and by having the class construct a predictable group theme on a given topic. Students may also be directed to works that point to the dangers of stereotyped thinking and may examine their own earlier papers for evidence of such thinking. After such activities, students are in a position to change their conceptions of writing--to see that writing can be a learning process and a way to generate thought and discover connections. Excerpts from a paper written late in the term by the student whose earlier writings were predictable and stereotyped illustrate how writing can change when students learn to see writing as a personally meaningful learning activity. (GW)

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WRITING TO AWARENESS: FINDING BATTERIES INSIDE THE MAGIC WAND

Carol J. Zera

Most of what I can tell students about writing they've already been told, and most of what students can read in textbooks on writing they've already read. Throughout their years in school students are taught to write. Perhaps "trained" is a better word to use than "taught" because many students seem to conceive of learning institutions as places of training, as systems established to turn out products: enter one six-year-old; exit one engineer, or one pharmacist. It's natural, then, that such students conceive of what is being taught in terms of production. It's natural for them to think they are being asked to produce products in order to be transformed into a product. Hence, the creation of a circle--with no outlet.

And it's not just students who seem to operate within this circle. Often educators themselves act as though the function of an educational institution is primarily to turn out superior, marketable products.

The liability of this seemingly pragmatic conception of education is in how severely it limits the function of a learning institution. That is, such a conception necessarily affects a student's definition of himself as "Student"--seen as someone in an interim stage in his transformation to "Pharmacist." And when a student defines himself in this way--as part of a production meant to turn him into a saleable commodity--it's understandable that he might hear what is taught as instructions for the production of that product, rather like getting instructions for assembling a wheelbarrow.

The value of confronting such a conception in the process of teaching writing goes beyond showing what can be significant about the activity of writing. To ask students to view writing as a way to generate thought and discover connections--as a learning process--is also to ask them to change

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their conceptions of what it means to be a student , and therefore of what a learning institution is meant to do and be.

For instance, when students conceive of learning institutions as something akin to factories they're apt to assume they're being asked to fit a pattern, to write according to a set prescription, to turn out a predictable product--and nothing else. And so, when assigned to write, such students are apt to produce papers sounding very much like this excerpt from a Theme about introverts and extroverts written at the beginning of last term by one of my students. It reads:

I. Most of the people that I have come into contact with cannot be classified as either introverts or extroverts, they have characteristics of both. But the most interesting are those who lean one way or the other.

The radical introvert slips quietly along the wall, inconspicuous in the shadows, by his every conscious effort he avoids confrontation with others. The introvert hates being singled out in any way. Don't expect him to address a group willingly, don't seat him at the head of a table. He's the one with his bathroom walls soundproofed....

The radical extrovert displays a Look-Out-World-Here-I-Come attitude. He feels that he will go unnoticed unless he is constantly asserting himself on all those within a hundred meters....

As I have said, the people I know are somewhere between these two extremes, but under certain circumstances they may slip to one end or the other. This is when they expose a most interesting facet of their personalities.

On the face of it, the paper seems livelier than the more obvious canned writing that many students produce. Yet the associations of the paper are predictable. The paper can easily be summarized in this way:

People are most interesting when they are
either radical introverts or radical extroverts.

Illustrations of each.

Therefore, at times, people can be interesting.

What's produced here is an empty circle which is part of that other empty circle of production. The writer never raises the question of what these terms mean. His examples are common illustrations of commonplace assumptions. An introvert is shy, avoids confrontation, and is very self-conscious; an extrovert is outgoing, loud, unself-conscious: a product produced by rules--and very little else.

In saying that the paper is predictable, I'm not saying that the student who wrote it is thoughtless or stupid. To the contrary, though he's not exceptional, he's a competent student. He's well trained. That the paper is as polished as it is shows that this writer has run this well rutted track before. That the paper is as predictable as it is shows how similar it is to countless others.

What's so disturbing about this paper and the thousands of others similar to it, is that there's nothing in this kind of writing that leads a writer to make discoveries, nothing educational in this exercise in writing. This student's paper is evidence of a misconception not just of the function of writing, but of what he's in school to do, to become.

When students conceive of writing only in terms of delivering a finished product, they apparently don't conceive of writing as an activity of learning, as learning as a function of writing. That's why it's ironic when students bemoan that they're treated like robots, since indeed they're conspirators in this game--committed players--perhaps because moving outside the empty circle demands so much more than merely following models or rules. Thus, to ask for more than organization, to ask for individual thoughts, individually expressed, asks students to be better learners, to consciously use learning institutions for more than the production of what has the illusion of being a finished product.

But how do we demonstrate to students that writing and education are both processes which make possible what we have to learn for ourselves if we're to be more than sheep? that writing sentence after sentence of commonplace notions shows a writer who knows only how to assemble, who doesn't seem to know how to do hard, conceptual thinking?

A good place to begin, I've found, is to demonstrate the extent to which some student writing is hardly more than an assemblage of cliched thoughts. Constructing what seems to be a normal paper by putting together sentences from a number of student papers is generally easy to do, no matter how inviting the assignment. There are usually some students who mistake any assignment--for example, one that leads into what it means to take a point of view or what is involved in making a decision--for a request to repeat commonplaces. Such distortion occurs easily in the context of the larger misconception that what's done in a learning institution has little to do with Real Life. With such a conception, a student has no reason to break the circle and probe why he hates mathematics or why she decided to be a pharmacist.

For instance, an assignment asking students to reconsider their attitudes toward rote learning may result in rote learned talk about rote learning. The themes will very likely parrot such notions as these:

> What is memorized is irrelevant and quickly forgotten.
>
> Second hand knowledge is separate and inferior to first hand knowledge.
>
> Rote learning pertains only to facts such as dates and multiplication tables.

Constructing a composite paper gives a teacher a way of illustrating just how stereotyped such thinking is, first by showing that five or fourteen papers seem to have been written by the same non-person, and then by pointing out that these assertions aren't necessarily true. Some things memorized years ago--pledges, poems, the Preamble to the Constitution--we do remember,

while some incidents that occurred last week we've forgotten already. And the repetition of the same assertions in the same words show that ideas (ways of thinking) can be rote learned too.

However, any papers that do show a thoughtful, individual response to the assignment can be used to show the contrast between what results when writing is viewed as the production o. a product, and conversely what results when writing is conceived as a process to shape and generate ideas.

A similar way to demonstrate the way the activity of writing can be a learning process is to give half of a paper, either half, to a class and ask students to project what preceded or what followed it. Papers based on commonplace assumptions or stereotypes (such as the introvert-extrovert paper) are easy to reconstruct with fair accuracy, while even well organized, clearly connected papers written by an individual mind making individual connections are virtually impossible to complete. The comparison of such opposite papers highlights one as an insignificant exercise, the other as a learning experience.

Yet another way to underline the comparative ease with which an empty Theme can be produced is to have a class construct on the blackboard a paper on a topic such as "World Hunger" or "Capital Punishment" or the "Progress of Mankind"--all of which have many instant associations. For example, using "World Hunger" as the subject, the whole paper falls into place with the thesis (invariably supplied by a student), that industrial nations of the world have an obligation to alleviate starvation. That viewpoint is followed automatically with such points as these:

1. Hunger is widespread, even in America.
2. The technology exists to produce enough food to feed the world.
3. Aid should be temporary until the poor can help themselves, and should be coupled with population control.

And how would such a Theme conclude? Obviously with a restatement of the original idea. Another empty circle that has no connection with either hunger or the world.

However, these ways of showing how prevalent and easy to use stereotyped notions are don't necessarily convey that there is something actually harmful about depending on them.

For this, a teacher might turn to such books as Dan Rather and Gary Paul Gates' The Palace Guard, which gives a description of the advertising jargon used in the Nixon White House, or to Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, which shows Eichmann's mind as completely incased in cliches. As Ms. Arendt says, "No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against...reality": cliches.

To form a contrast with Eichmann, a teacher might use Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, which illustrates the value of defining a situation in one's own terms. As Frankl puts it,

> We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.
>
> p. 104

Since we choose our ways according to how we define situations, it's natural to return to the ways students define their subjects (and therefore themselves) in their writing. An assignment asking them to examine their earlier papers for evidence of what Hannah Arendt calls "safeguards against reality" often reveals to students how little some of their writing discloses

of what they know. And when this point of awareness is reached, when students realize that they've been reducing their subjects and therefore their image of themselves to something commonplace that has little to do with them, they're then in a position to change their conceptions of writing, of themselves as writers, of themselves as students.

The papers students write aren't just a reflection of one class--or even a series of English classes. They're reflections of a student's conception of what he's doing in a learning institution as a student. Thus, awakening a student to writing as an activity that can mean something to him invites him to discern his education as similarly vital.

To illustrate how writing changes when a student conceives of writing as not merely the production of a product, here are excerpts from a paper written late in the term by the same student who began with the paper about introverts-extroverts. He writes,

II.

> ...Sure enough, majestically poised in my stocking on Christmas morning was the Magic Wand. I pulled it out and examined it closely. It consisted of a two foot sky-blue plastic shaft with a glittery transparent star mounted on top. I wasn't crazy about the styling, a little too effeminate for me. It bore a close resemblance to Belinda's, although I wasn't aware that hers had an on-off switch on the side. I did like its heft, though. It felt solid and well balanced. I made some practice swings. It was about then that my brother began pinging me with little multi-colored discs fired from his Star Trek gun. I cursed Santa Claus for arming my brother with a new weapon. Last year it was a long range water gun.
>
> But now I was ready for him. I first considered turning him into a frog (that seemed to be a popular spell), but decided that making him disappear would be a more permanent solution. I smugly aimed the star at him and flicked the switch. A light bulb in the star lit up, but my cackling brother was still there. My frustration increased as I tried all the various wand-waving motions I knew: the Merlin thrust, the Fairy-God-Mother sweep, and the Belinda circular gesture. He was still there, shooting with

> increasing accuracy. In desperation I decided to take a defensive action. I would make myself disappear. But despite my most elaborate flourishes, I was still an easily visible target.
>
> Finally, I became unglued. Brandishing the impotent wand wildly over my head, I charged him and with my best abra-ca-dabra, I beaned him.

From here the writer goes on to describe his sense of loss when he learned that nothing is permanent, that the allegiances are arbitrary, even that he doesn't sing well. And such speculations lead him to this conclusion:

> ...As the learner progresses, the world doesn't change; how much of the world that he sees changes. In this pursuit he risks all that he finds security in. For instance, a child takes for granted that his parents are completely capable, until he compares them with the rest of the world. I was twelve years old before I realized that my mother's hamburgers were terrible. And once I discovered that, I started questioning everything else she did.
>
> ...It was on that Christmas morning long ago that I got my first good slap of reality. My brother ran off screaming to my mother and I was left holding a shattered blue tube. I can still remember the sickening feeling I had when I pointed the tube downward. Out slid five Ever-Ready Penlight batteries.

This paper is evidence of the value of putting students in a position to learn that writing is an activity that can be significant to them, that being a student means a lot more than being passively transformed into a product.

Something to write by? We should, instead, offer students something to write for.

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